

After Death: The intermediate state

In *Hellfire and Destruction* and in *After Death: What the New Testament Does and Does Not Teach* I show the New Testament is absolutely clear that the ultimate end of the determinedly unrepentant is destruction – meaning ceasing to exist. This is not based on any elaborate exegesis or inference, but because the New Testament repeatedly says it is ‘destruction/perishing’ and when these Greek terms are used in a judgmental sense against humans this is what they always mean. The denial of this in favour of hell as unending torment is based on some weird reinterpretations of plain terms.

The New Testament is also totally clear that at some time in the future there will be a general resurrection, and everyone will be judged by God according to what they did on earth, some heading ultimately for destruction and others for eternal life in a new heaven and earth.

My books also look at the issue of what happens to us between death and resurrection. But on this the New Testament is not at all specific or clear, and any conclusion has to be tentative.

My own conclusion is that it is most likely that for both unrighteous and righteous people this intermediate time involves total lack of consciousness, analogous to a time spent under general anaesthetic. The next thing of which everyone will be aware after death is resurrection to judgment.

I am well aware that others have taken various New Testament verses to imply some kind of consciousness in this intermediate period. The core problem with this is that each of the verses cited would give a different version of this experience, and for many of the verses a very ingenious exegesis is required for them to be connected at all. The most attractive option would seem to me to be a kind of dream like semi consciousness (seemingly a view in N T Wright) but actually *none* of the cited biblical sources seem to imply this.

That *Gehenna* implies destruction not unending torment is both clear in Scripture and concerns the very nature of God himself so I feel strongly that those who love God and accept Scripture should recognise it. The idea that in the state between death and resurrection to the final judgment those as yet unjudged should be suffering agony in the sight of righteous in bliss is also repugnant, but dream-like semi consciousness for the righteous is not, and I feel no particular antipathy to the idea, though see no evidence for it in Scripture.

However, let us look at the various verses cited by different people to determine some kind of conscious intermediate state, and what that state is:

(1) [Paradise] Luke 23:43 I tell you today you will be with me in paradise.

Commonly this is taken as ‘I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise’. If this really *is* the right place to insert a comma then the dead righteous are presumed in ‘paradise’ – a Persian word for a beautiful peaceful garden.

(2) [Abraham’s Bosom] Luke 16:16-31 The parable of the rich man and Lazarus

Lazarus is in the ‘bosom of Abraham’, from which conversations are taking place with unrighteous friends, relatives, strangers, and acquaintances who are in intense pain and suffering in Hades.

(3) [Active and able to return to meet people] Matt 17:1-9 The transfiguration,

Moses and Elijah were seen in a ‘vision’ by the disciples talking with Jesus.

(4) [Under God’s throne] Rev 6:9-11 The Martyrs under God’s Throne

These martyrs were lamenting the lack of judgment for their persecutors and were given white robes.

(5) [Standing waving palm branches] Rev 7:9-14 Those who came from the tribulation

These who had been persecuted in the tribulation were standing in white robes waving palm branches shouting “‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”

(6) [Singing a new song] Rev 14:1-5 there are 144 thousand especially holy ones

These were male virgins singing and playing harps.

(7) [In rest] Heb 4:10 They entered into his rest

Any of us can ‘enter his rest’ through faith.

(8) [witnesses] Heb 12:1-3 we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses

Some have suggested that this means we are surrounded by dead Christians looking on.

(9) [naked] 2 Cor 5:3: we shall not be found naked

After the resurrection we 'shall not be found naked' but in a new body – so before the resurrection some conclude that we must have been conscious but 'naked'.

(10) [at home with the Lord] 2 Cor 5:8 'I would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord'

This is argued to imply Paul's longing for the intermediate state rather than his post-resurrection life.

(11) [God of the living] Luke 20:28 he is not a God of the dead, but of the living: for all live unto him.

The assumption made by some is that being living implies being conscious.

(12) [the medium and Samuel] in 1 Samuel 28

Some suggest that the medium being able to 'call up Samuel' shows that the dead Samuel was conscious.

(13) [spirits in prison] 1 Pet 3:19

Seen as dead people, though sometimes a 'host of captives' assumed release in Eph 4:9

(14) [spirits made perfect] Heb 12:23

Some take this to mean spirits made perfect after death whilst awaiting the resurrection.

According to the various verses cited, then, the intermediate state could be 'paradise', or anguish at seeing and talking with loved ones suffering in agonising flames, or rest, or nakedness, or wearing a white robe and either complaining about injustice or singing and waving palm branches, etc. The only one that might offer a semi-conscious state of bliss is (1) paradise.

There are real exegetical problems with any or all of them being used to imply a conscious intermediate state.

- (1)** Luke 23:43 says To you (*Soi*) I say (*legō*) today (*sēmeron*) with (*met'*) me (*emou*) you will be (*ese*) in (*en*) the (*tō*) paradise (*paradeisō*).

The word 'today' is an adverb and in Greek it can be placed before or after the verb it describes. To indicate which a dot could be placed either before or after the adverb but in most of the early Greek codices of this verse there is no punctuating dot. This means that it could mean

either: (a) 'I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise'

or: (b) 'I tell you today, you will be with me in paradise'.

Just one fourth century manuscript (*Codex Vaticanus*) contains a dot after *sēmeron* which would indicate (b), so this was probably not in the original but was how the transcriber of Vaticanus read it.

Luke uses *sēmeron* 19 times elsewhere in his writings. In 13 of them it is used as an adverb after the verb:

Luke 2:11 to you is born today

Luke 5:26 we have seen remarkable things today

Luke 12:28 alive in the field today

Luke 13:32 healing people today

Luke 13:33 I must press on today

Luke 22:34 the cockerel crows today

Luke 22:61 the cockerel crows today

Acts 19:40 what happened today

Acts 20:26 I declare to you today

Acts 22:3 you are today

Acts 24:21 on trial before you today

Acts 26:2 I stand before you today

Acts 26:29 listening to me today

- Acts 27:33 Paul says 'today is the fourteenth day' which uses it differently

- Acts 11:31 the adverb is before the verb 'today I have begotten you' but this is an OT quote so it has to be.

In two instances the word 'then' already implies a time:

- Acts 4:21 he then began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled..."

- Acts 19:9 he then said to him 'today salvation is come to this house'

One is ambivalent:

- Acts 19:5 'having hurried come down today for it behoves me to stay in your house Actually Zacchaeus both hurried down and had Jesus to stay 'today;'

In only one instance Luke freely chooses to place the adverb before the verb. Is:

- Acts 4:9 'if today we are being examined' .

Usually, then, Luke's linguistic practice favours (b) above. Moreover, in Acts 20:26 it is obvious that Paul is speaking 'today' but he uses *sēmeron* to emphasize the urgency and importance of the declaration. This reflects the practice of using 'today' like this in the OT, particularly Deuteronomy eg "I teach you *today*" (4:1), "I set before you *today*" (11:26), "I give you *today*" (28:13), "I command you *today*" (6:6; 7:11; 12:32), "I testify against you *today*" (8:19), and "I declare you *today*" (30:18). Thus eg Deut 30:18 Septuagint 'I announce (*anangéllo*) to you (*soi*) today (*sēmeron*) that (*óti*) you perish (*apoleía*). The 'today' is for emphasis, it is obvious that the speaker is speaking on that day.

Given all this, it is a mystery why the majority of commentators seem to have copied each other in taking (a) as the meaning in Luke 23:43.

There are also theological problems with taking it to mean that the repentant criminal will be with Jesus that same day. If the criminal joined him that day, then Jesus would have to be in 'paradise' within a couple of hours after he died because the Jewish day ended by nightfall. We know that his body was in the grave at this time, but where was his 'soul'? He had not risen from the dead until three days later, or ascended to heaven until six weeks later. The word 'paradise' is used elsewhere only in 2 Cor 12:4 and Rev 2:7. In Revelation 2:7 paradise is where the tree of life which in Rev 22 is shown to be in the new heaven and earth stage. In 1 Cor 12 it seems that Paul had a 'vision' of this – but it is never cited as a place for the intermediate state of the righteous, either in the NT or any of the Jewish materials available at the time. Given it was a 'vision' it could have been a vision of the future paradise, as John had in Revelation. The only contemporarily available Jewish source with consciousness in the intermediate state is 1 Enoch, and as mentioned in my books this was not paradise. Actually, if Dr Who can visit the future then surely God could have transported Paul there and back in his vision 'in or out of the body'? Paul refers to the 'third heaven' as 'paradise' but doesn't say that when Jesus ascended, he moved paradise up to the third heaven from its previous location. All such exegesis is very fanciful. Moreover, if Paul had visited it and seen the intermediate dead in a paradisaical situation why did he not reassure the Thessalonians and Corinthians of this? And why bother about a resurrection and judgment if they were already in paradise? Why would there be absolutely no NT teaching on this? And it all depends on putting the absent comma in an unusual particular place in one single short saying.

- (2) What about the parable of the **rich man and Lazarus**? Is 'Abraham's bosom' in the parable a real description of the intermediate states of the deceased righteous? It can hardly be called 'paradise' or 'rest' or any of the other positive terms to be somewhere looking at all those whom one loved but who died as unbelievers now in absolute agony pleading unsuccessfully for help. Also, if the parable actually describes reality, then the unrighteous are suffering torture before their case comes up in the last judgment. Jewish law strictly forbade torture of suspects before conviction – Paul rebukes the High Priest for a smack in the mouth (never mind agonising flames) before judgement in Acts 23:3. Some have suggested that whilst the parable might not be exact it shows consciousness, rationality and a sense of morality in the intermediate state. But one cannot simply abstract out the bits one wants and ignore the others in this way. The parable is satire, it attacks popular culture not Pharisaic theology, and as I explain in more detail in my books tells us nothing about the intermediate state. It certainly cannot be used to suggest some kind of semi-conscious dream state for the righteous. Much more on this is in my books.
- (3) In the **transfiguration appearances**, Jesus describes what the disciples see as a 'vision', he does not recount to them some kind of conversation he had with Moses and Elijah. A 'vision' is contrasted by Peter in Acts 12:9 with reality. In Acts 10 Peter saw in a vision a sheet with lots of unclean animals, but surely God did not literally create a lot of unclean animals in a sheet on a rooftop? The animals were not 'really there' and conscious of Peter. In Acts 9:12 we find that Paul has seen in a vision a man called Ananias coming to him, but of course

Ananias was not really there when Paul had this vision – he came later. A vision of Jesus talking with Moses and Elijah was to show the disciples something, it certainly does not imply that Moses and Elijah were actually there, conscious, and able to converse with someone alive on earth. God could, of course, have especially awakened them from unconscious sleep just at this time, but the text does not imply this. The transfiguration tells us nothing about an intermediate state between death and resurrection.

- (4)-(6)** It is very hard to interpret **the visions in Revelation** in any kind of literalistic way. (4)-(5) refer specifically to martyrs, and either side of Rev 6:9-11 we find Death riding a horse and the sun turning black. It is just not that kind of book. (5) sounds more fun, but only for a limited number of virgin men some of them playing harps. Maybe this is where the popular idea of people dying and sitting on clouds playing harps comes from, but it does not help us to a serious understanding of the intermediate state for the righteous in general. And if it were true what need for a resurrection or the new spiritual body?
- (7)** Heb 4:10 is not very helpful because ‘rest’ could be unconscious, and in any case ‘entering into God’s rest’ for the Israelites would have been entering Canaan not ‘rest’ in the sense of inaction.
- [8]** In Heb 12:1-3 the ‘**witnesses**’ in the ‘cloud of witnesses’ is the word *martyrōn*. The word does not mean an onlooker but someone like a witness in court who testifies – and the term is also applied (eg Rev 17:6) to the ‘witnesses’ to Jesus who died for their testimony. The writer has been talking about such martyrs, not as present onlookers but as those whose martyrs’ testimonies to Jesus should inspire us. In my office I am surrounded by ‘testimonies’ in biographies of those who loved and served Jesus, but their presence is not literal and they are not conscious and looking at me.
- (9)-(10)** is about Paul’s longing to be ‘**with the Lord**’. But 1 Thess 4:16-17 states the dead and living will be caught up to ‘meet the Lord in the air and so shall we be ever with the Lord’ from the time of the resurrection. What Paul longs for is the time of the resurrection, not the intermediate state. The use by some people of 2 Cor 5:3 to imply some state of the soul being ‘naked’ after death and until the resurrection is very odd. In 2 Cor 4 Paul has referred to the present body as ‘a jar of clay’, ‘afflicted’, ‘given over to death’, and ‘wasting away’. He contrasts this in 2 Cor 4:11 that ‘he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.’ The word ‘naked’ is not neutral but is associated with poverty and destitution. It is our present body that is sown as a natural and perishable body and raised as an imperishable spiritual body (1 Cor 15:42-44). So in 2 Cor 5 it is in the *present* body we groan and long for the resurrection spiritual body. It is the present body that is ‘naked’ and we will be raised clothed in our spiritual ‘dwelling’. This has nothing to do with any supposed intermediate state. In any case, being destitute and ‘naked’ does not sound much like ‘paradise’ for the intermediate state of believers. If in this intermediate state Paul is already ‘with the Lord’ then he will be forever ‘with the Lord’ from the moment of death rather than from the resurrection as Thessalonians promises. Also, in 1 Thess 4 Paul says he does not want them to be uninformed, but says nothing about any intermediate state. In 1 Cor 15 Paul is adamant that Jesus rose again and there will be a resurrection. He says that ‘if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised . . . those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.’. But if they are in an intermediate state of bliss then if there were no resurrection they would not have ‘perished’ (ceased to exist) but could stay in their paradisaical state as spirits forever. I know of no evidence that contemporary Jews believed that the dead righteous were in intermediate bliss. Martha’s interaction with Jesus in John 11:24 shows that she believed her brother would rise at the last day, not that he was in present paradise. Olivia in Twelfth Night says of her deceased brother ‘I know his soul is in heaven’ but Martha says no such thing.
- (11)** God is, as Jesus said, **God of the living**, but the text says that to God they are alive, not that they are alive to God, and if God sees them as living this does not imply consciousness. Jesus said that ‘Abraham rejoiced to see my day’ (John 8:56) not that ‘Abraham rejoices to see my day’. Abraham had a prophetic vision of that day when all nations would be blessed by his descendant, he was not looking on during the first century.

- (12) **The 1 Sam 28 medium and Samuel** account has in 28:15: ‘Samuel said to Saul, “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?”’ So was the dead Samuel both conscious and knowing the future? Are *all* the dead conscious and know the future? Commentators differ as to whether the text implies it really was Samuel rather than an impersonation, but interestingly the Talmud (TB Hagigah 4b, TJ Hagigah 2a.) has Samuel upset because he thought it was the Day of Judgment. If it really was him it sounds more as though the medium had ‘disturbed him’ in the sense of disturbing his unconscious sleep rather than drawn him out of some kind of paradise. Even if we take the account at face value it says us nothing about consciousness for the righteous dead.
- (13) In 1 Pet 3:19 Jesus visited the ‘**spirits in prison**’ and in Eph 4:9 when Jesus ascended he ‘**led a host of captives**’. There are various views on this. In one, Jesus visited the OT saints in prison and released them to paradise when he rose from the dead. In another the OT saints were in paradise and when he ascended Jesus moved paradise to the third heaven. However, the spirits in Prison according to 2 Pet 2:4 and Jude 6 were fallen angels in *Tartarus* not humans in Hades. In Eph 4:9 the ‘descent’ is to earth not Hades, and the ‘gifts’ were to the church – gifts of of apostles, prophets etc. Neither verse is relevant at all to the intermediate state, and they are looked at in more detail in my books.
- (14) Heb 12:23 refers to ‘**the spirits of the righteous, who have been made perfect**’. However, the same term is used earlier in Heb 10:14: ‘For by one sacrifice he **has made perfect** forever those who are being made holy.’ In the letter to the Hebrews, faith regards things as yet in the future as certain. The verse is speaking of the permanence of the sacrifice of Jesus, so in a sense this has ‘made perfect’ those who are in the process of being made holy. Heb 12:23 is apocalyptic, just as the New Jerusalem is certain even though in Revelation it is future. The writer to the Hebrews is not wanting to refer to some intermediate state awaiting the resurrection and New Jerusalem, but the certainty of these things.

The bottom line is that some verses are clearly irrelevant, and all the acrobatic exegesis on the others is very dodgy, often makes no consistent sense, and gives conflicting pictures of the intermediate state. I haven’t really addressed directly the idea of the *righteous* dead in a semi-conscious bliss, but there is no NT indication this is so. Moreover, it would leave unanswered the situation of the *unrighteous* dead. If the righteous dream-like consciousness is pleasant because they are ‘with the Lord’ what about the unrighteous? Are they in suffering before they have been judged? Or are they unconscious and only the righteous dead have any consciousness at all? It really is simpler to conclude that between death and the general resurrection everyone is simply unconscious, and the righteous and unrighteous will be differentiated at the Last Judgement as eg Matt 25 indicates. This is what I believe the apostles thought.

It can also be added that we understand so little about the nature of time, and what we do understand is mysterious. We do know from the science of relativity that timelines are not uniform, that high speed physical motion or the presence of gravity can slow down time. This does not mean ‘apparent time’ or human aging process, but actual time itself. So it is entirely possible that, whilst in our timeline the time between the apostle Paul’s death and the resurrection could be over two millennia, in his own timeline the time between his death and the resurrection could pass infinitely quickly ie be zero. There would be no need for him to be in paradise for two millennia in the same timeline as us.

As I began by saying, it is clearly demonstrable that the NT teaching that *Gehenna* implies destruction for the determinedly unrepentant. What our experience will be between death and resurrection is not given anywhere in Scripture, and to me the most likely thing is total unconsciousness.

So to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain – even though I may want for the sake of my family to delay the latter as long as I can.

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January 2025